

Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

**Hearing on the
Reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration
January 20, 1999**

Statement of Senator John D. Rockefeller IV

Mr. Chairman, Senator Hollings and Senator Gorton, let me begin this morning by saying how pleased and proud I am to be taking on the job of Ranking Member on the Aviation Subcommittee. It is a great honor, particularly, to be following in the foot steps of Wendell Ford, who served this body for 24 years, and served as Chairman and Ranking Member of the Aviation Subcommittee for as long as any of us can remember. He became in that time one of the Congress' greatest experts on aviation matters, and I hope and intend to do justice to that legacy.

In stepping into Senator Ford's shoes, I aim to ensure not only that the aviation needs of West Virginia and other rural states and communities are secured, but also that the needs of the nation and of my colleagues' constituents are addressed. Certainly there will be competing interests to balance, and sometimes conflicts to struggle through, but together we must continue to meet our responsibility to maintain safety in the skies, to support fully the needs of the aviation system and modernization effort, to ensure that the industry provides the service our constituents demand and deserve, to facilitate stable funding sources for our airports, and to be vigilant in opening up markets for our air carriers worldwide.

These are daunting tasks, but we are up to the challenge, and I look forward to working with the Chairman and members of the Committee this year and in the future to craft aviation legislation that we can all take pride in.

The bill introduced yesterday and being considered before us today — to authorize spending for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) through fiscal year 2000 — is a starting point for that work.

I understand that the Chairman plans to vigorously pursue enactment of a comprehensive, multi-year FAA reauthorization bill, and I am pleased that we are beginning the Committee's work with an immediate hearing on the subject. Given the March 31 deadline for the current authorization, the FAA bill clearly must be our first order of business. However, I also want to make clear at the outset that I am

open, and believe we all need to be open, to considering another approach if the March at time frame does not allow us to do all that we want and should do in a multi-year bill.

Last year, the Congress was able to pass only a six-month extension of the Airport Improvement Program (AIP), effectively freezing half of the \$1.95 billion allocated to the program. Absent a reauthorization, our airports and our constituents may lose the ability to upgrade a runway or start an expansion project that facilitates new business opportunities for our communities — all because the Congress is having trouble figuring its way out of a timing box we've gotten ourselves in to.

Regardless of any resolve we may have, our House counterparts have already favorably reported a clean, 6-month extension of the program. I would hate for the Senate to rush through a broad bill only to see the entire program lapse because our House colleagues refuse to consider anything other than a clean, short-term extension, before the March deadline. The blame-game that would ensue from a lapse in the FAA's authorization would only harm the citizens who sent us here.

I believe we can address the need for more slots, we can work to improve service to small communities, we can make sure the FAA has the ability to move forward with its modernization plans, and we can balance out competing concerns on the question of funding, but it will not happen overnight.

Let me offer a few examples. Senator Gorton last year offered an amendment in the Commerce Committee that would have raised the passenger facility charge (PFC) from \$3 per person per enplanement to \$4. I supported Senator Gorton. I expect that he will again try to raise the PFC, and the Administration has indicated that they will propose an increase as well. This is a tough issue, pitting the carriers against the airports, and letting some claim that it is a new tax. However, another dollar could get us a lot more capacity at our nation's airports.

Looking into the future, the needs of the aviation system are tremendous. All of the projections show that we will have 300 million more passengers by the year 2009. As much as I would like those passengers all to flow through West Virginia, I know that our airports across the nation will face constraints — money is tight, and a PFC increase will help. How the PFC is structured, the types of controls possible, and what they are used for, are all difficult choices, and I want to work with the airports and the carriers to try to resolve this issue in a balanced way.

As a second example, the air traffic control system also needs to be revamped. It is a complex system and each new piece requires changes in the cockpit, new procedures and new avionics — change, therefore, that cannot happen overnight.

GAO recently reported that the FAA is making progress, changing the way it does business and working with the industry to figure out what is needed. GAO also reports that the FAA will need \$17 billion to complete the modernization effort.

Without that degree of funding, we may not be able to get all we want — new computers, new ways to move aircraft, and more capacity to make the system safer. According to the National Civil Aviation Review Commission, unless we address this problem, we are facing gridlock in the skies.

These are hard and serious issues, and they deserve full and thoughtful consideration, with input from the Administration and all of the affected parties, before we move forward with a multi-year reauthorization bill. We have an opportunity this year to make some real changes. I do not want it to pass us by.